

The Rocky Mountain Federal Leadership Forum FRAMEWORK for REGIONAL RESOURCE ASSESSMENTS February 2001

Introduction/Purpose

The Federal Leadership Forum (FLF), consisting of principal managers of Federal Rocky Mountain (Colorado, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming) land management and regulatory agencies, convened in October 1998 to address issues concerning the unprecedented high levels of recent development of oil and gas resources in Rocky Mountain basins and the effects of development activities on other resources. Most of the issues were related to compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in decision-making for oil and gas activities. The FLF also recognized that each project or activity must be consistent with agency mandates and land use plans, and consider and address officially approved and adopted resource related policies and programs of other Federal agencies, State and local governments and Indian tribes.

The FLF set a goal of achieving a more unified approach to NEPA and to resolve issues related to oil and gas development. To achieve this goal, the FLF Core Team established an inter-agency Regional Assessment Sub-team (Team C) to explore the potential of using "Regional Resource Assessments" to help provide land managers with more complete data or information in the decision-making process.

The assignment or purpose of Team C was to; 1) develop a common understanding and definition of "Regional Resource Assessment;" 2) develop criteria for determining the need for and scope of regional resource assessments; and 3) establish a multi-agency strategy for conducting regional resource assessments. This report summarizes the result of Team C's efforts. The Team recognizes that regional resource assessments have a much broader application than just oil and gas development. Thus, this report reflects the application of regional resource assessments in a basic multiple-use context.

Background Discussion

To manage the Federal lands effectively, whether developing comprehensive land use plans or analyzing a specific project, land management agencies need broad level information or data on natural resources and land uses that is comparable across administrative boundaries.

The FLF Core Team Combined Report (June 1999) noted that land management agencies, for various reasons, have often limited the extent of environmental analyses and geographic coverage to the area contained within administrative boundaries or within the immediate boundaries of a given project or proposed action. Common reasons were that comparable data was not gathered or was not available for the lands outside the localized area under consideration, time and resources did not permit it to be gathered and

assimilated, established agency workloads could not be modified to coincide, or it was simply overlooked. This has led to criticism that reasonably foreseeable activities or levels of development, cumulative impacts, and appropriate mitigation, may not have been adequately addressed in some land management agency environmental analysis documents. These limitations are compounded when subsequent analyses and decisions are tied to these documents. In Addition, other concerns raised were that some older environmental documents may be inadequate for tiering or use as supporting documentation for subsequent analysis, because they are too localized.

Regional resource assessments would provide land management agencies with credible information across administrative boundaries that support the development and evaluation of management strategies, the analysis of proposed actions or projects, or the modification of existing management plans. In this way, regional resource assessments can help address cumulative impacts, reduce duplication of effort, ensure consistency and provide a dynamic approach to meeting agency mandates.

Definition

A Regional Resource Assessment is an evaluation of the occurrence, condition and trend of a natural resource (e.g., air, biological, water, etc.) or land use (e.g., oil and gas development, various recreation activities, livestock grazing, etc.), over a geographic area, unrestricted by jurisdictional or institutional boundaries, and includes the factors affecting or affected by those conditions or trends. Information from two or more assessments can be integrated to address an issue or management concern.

Currently, there are many perceptions or interpretations of what a Regional Resource Assessment may be. Therefore, it is important to first understand what a Regional Resource Assessment is not. A Regional Resource Assessment:

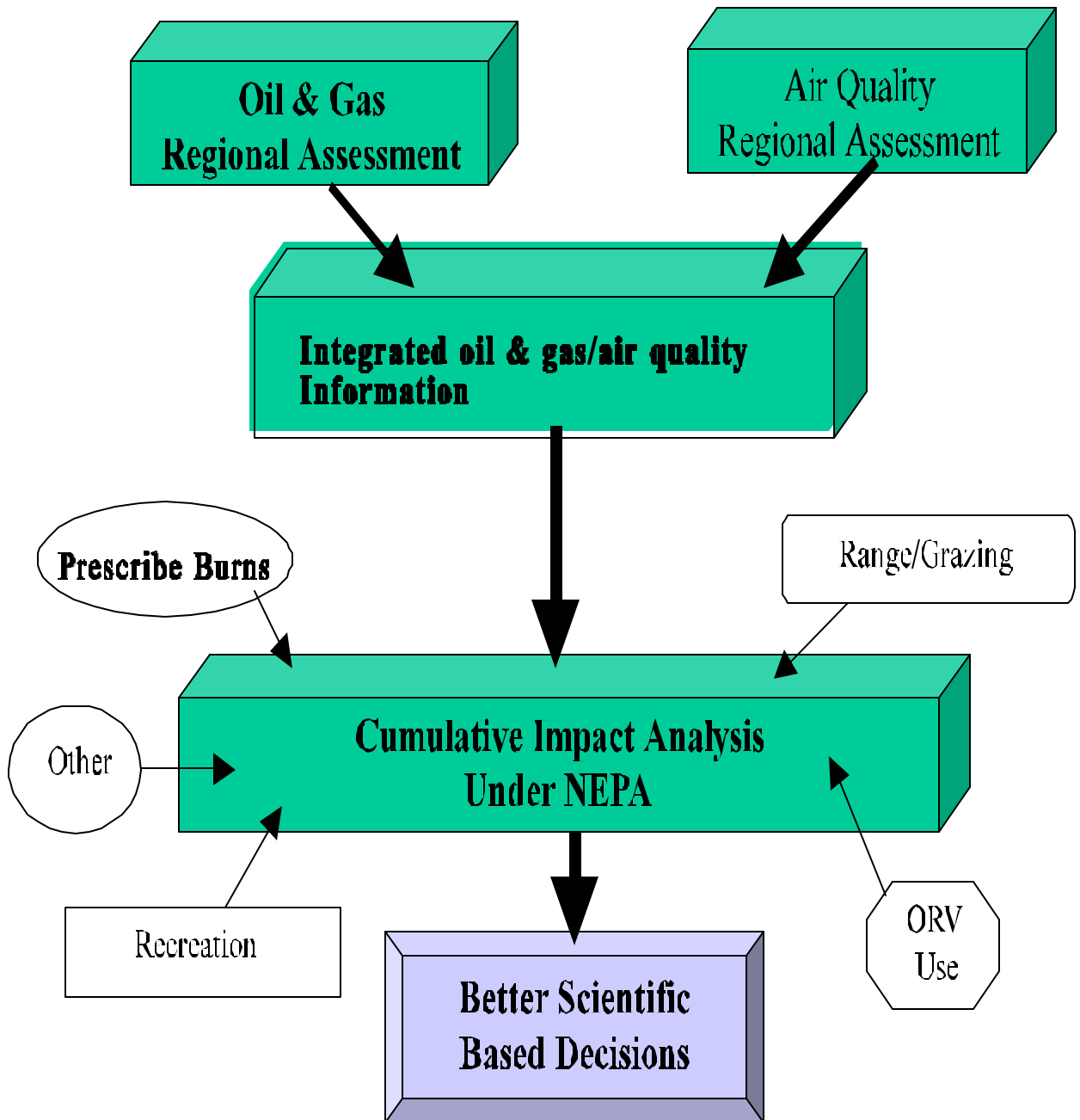
1. Is not a NEPA cumulative impact analysis-- The regional resource assessment would provide resource and land use data to be used in subsequent analysis of direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental effects in the NEPA process.
2. Does not identify or set stress levels, thresholds or establish new standards and parameters. It may be necessary for thresholds or standards to go through the responsible agency's planning or rule making process, which includes the opportunity for public comment.
3. Is not an agency's planning or management decision document.
4. Is not part of and is conducted outside of the framework of the NEPA (i.e., it is not an environmental analysis procedure or an EA or EIS). This concept is consistent with the March 15, 1999, report by the Committee of Scientists "Sustaining the People's Lands, Recommendations for Stewardship of the National Forests and Grasslands into the Next Century," which states in part:

“Assessments have such an important role in providing a credible information base for policy development and decision making that they should be organized as a separate task. Most critically, assessments do not produce decisions and therefore, should not be made to function under the NEPA process associated with decision making.”

5. Is not confined to a fixed geographic area. The size or geographic location of regional resource assessments will vary with individual situations.

6. Is not a multi-land use assessment covering the same geographic area. However, more than one individual resource or land use regional assessment can overlap one geographic area.

The products of regional resource assessments are databases, and land use and resource information that are developed and maintained by agency and tribal partners. They are available to those participating partners and the general public for use in environmental analyses, planning, and decision-making. In general, the regional resource assessment concept is consistent with the concepts of collaborative land and resource management, promoting inter-agency cooperation, improving responsiveness to customers and stakeholders, and using the principles of multiple use, and sustained yield and environmental integrity.



Relationship to Inventory and Monitoring

A resource assessment is concerned with both data collection and with evaluating or interpreting the data to identify resource conditions, trends, and any potential land use conflicts or concerns. Posing questions about resource and environmental concerns, and determining whether the necessary inventory data is available to answer them can determine when to prepare the assessment. Therefore, inventory would be a key component of an assessment.

Monitoring is a post NEPA process to determine if anticipated effects actually occurred and/or if the identified mitigation was successful. It is done within the well-confined parameters of the analysis and decision being monitored. From the perspective of a regional resource assessment, monitoring may provide a feedback loop that would help keep assessments current or identify when updates are needed.

Relationship to Planning/NEPA

A regional resource assessment provides a natural resource and land use information base, which is used to conduct environmental analyses and to prepare various plans (e.g. strategic, land use, activity, project). As identified in the Core Team Combined Report (1999), too often assessments have been limited to agency-administered lands within a single jurisdiction or smaller geographic unit. Regional resource assessments conducted over larger areas and in cooperation with multiple partners, would respond to the criticism that past efforts have been too narrow in scope to adequately address many issues (e.g. weed invasion, oil and gas development, wide-ranging species conservation). Such assessments would also help set the broader context in which planning decisions about specific resources or uses are made.

Agency Needs and Criteria for Regional Resource Assessments (What is driving us.)

In order to manage oil and gas resources and meet multiple-use objectives, land management agencies need to maintain resource information and databases, and eliminate data gaps in a cost effective manner while avoiding, or preventing delays in federal land use authorizations and approvals. For example; many original projections of reasonably foreseeable development scenarios (RFDs) were prepared prior to the increased interest in developing minerals from federal lands and prior to increased interests in other uses of the federal lands, such as recreation, open space, etc. This increased interest sometimes exceeds the level of activity that was initially assumed.

When impacts from proposed activities approach or exceed the level projected and analyzed in land use plans, delays in land use authorizations may be unavoidable. Too often, new information must be gathered to analyze the changed condition and supplement or modify existing decision documents where needed.

There is also a need to evaluate broader geographic and programmatic issues focusing on interrelationships of land and resource uses and newly affected resources (e.g., air quality).

Finally, regional resource assessments help the land manager to make credible and legally defensible decisions thereby limiting appeals and lawsuits.

Several things could signal the need to prepare a regional resource assessment:

- Significant shifts in resource trends,
- Changes in environmental conditions, or
- New issues, information or concerns

For example, new or proposed threatened or endangered species listings or technical changes that involve increased development could trigger the need for a regional resource assessment. Regional resource assessments can be precipitated by the need for land use plan amendments or RFD revisions, by availability of new scientific or environmental information, by an identified need for additional information or data, or as an outcome of monitoring implemented projects.

Resources or land uses occurring over a broad spatial area, interconnected resource use conflicts, environmental concerns, and other issues could point toward the need to conduct studies or assessments on a regional basis. This could require regional resource assessments that cross-jurisdictional boundaries and the need for improved multi-agency cooperation and collaboration. Efforts will be made to identify RRAs that meet the needs of all agencies.

Finally, changes in policy, new national initiatives, legislation or litigation could provide the impetus for regional resource assessments.

Benefits of Regional Resource Assessments

Federal land managers can use information from regional resource assessments, integrated with other information, as an analytical tool to help clarify or focus issues generated by existing or potential land and resource use conflicts. Regional resource assessments also aid in identifying opportunities to achieve long-term goals, or to translate broad strategies into site-specific management actions. As necessary, they are conducted to compile and generate resource information regarding specific resources or land uses, and to analyze that information to provide the independent scientific context needed to help define conditions, trends, problems and potential risks that are necessary for proposing management options and alternatives.

Since regional resource assessments are done outside of the NEPA process, they are not encumbered by legal or regulatory procedural requirements. They provide a common scientific and technical information source, which can be maintained current and used by all agencies or stakeholders. They are best conducted in a collaborative Federal and State agency process across administrative boundaries using all credible information sources. For example, a regional resource assessment concerning the development and associated

activities of an energy and mineral resource could involve overlapping jurisdictions of multiple states based on the nature and extent of the specific mineral commodity and associated geologic province. To address issues associated with each commodity, multiple regional resource assessments would be conducted, yet not confined to a specific geographic area or region.

Regional resource assessments, which encompass several jurisdictions, would be costly for a single agency to accomplish. By utilizing multi-agency resources and crossing jurisdictional boundaries participating agencies will benefit from combined assets (people, expertise, funding, location). The combining of agency assets in the process of completing a regional resource assessment will enable each agency to use people, funding and time more efficiently and effectively.

The process of conducting a regional resource assessment across multiple jurisdictions, which utilizes multi-agency team members and shares agency knowledge and skills, will improve interagency communication and collaboration. This cooperative process will enable the multiple agency employees to acquire a better understanding of the similarities, differences and authorities of the various FLF agencies, and will help with consistency in the use of terminology and interpretation of laws and regulations. This cooperation should result in land and resource decisions with fewer impacts to the environment and more consistency in management by all involved agencies and industries. Regional resource assessments would provide agencies with the up to date data needed to make more reliable forecasts of resource trends and potential demands. By working cooperatively, agency resources and use forecasts would be based on similar data, thus lending greater credibility. RFD scenarios could be kept up to date. By keeping the RFDs up to date, managers will be able to anticipate resource demands more efficiently and accurately.

Regional resource assessments identify and address emerging issues in a timely manner. Resource use conflicts can be examined in relationship to the capabilities of the land and the resource base to provide for the uses. Regional resource assessments and the associated resource information can also help to avoid crisis situations. The unanticipated coal bed methane development and surge in oil and gas development in the Powder River Basin are examples of where regional resource assessments and current resource information could have reduced or avoided the untimely and excessive expenditure of money and manpower to deal with the situation.

Completing resource assessments on a regional scale will enable land managers to base land and resource use decisions on anticipated effects to entire watersheds or ecosystems. Agency managers will have up-to-date information with which to make these land and resource use decisions. This will enable these decisions to be responsive to both customer needs as well as the needs of the resources. This pro-active approach will allow land managers to modify or curtail uses before sensitive resources become critically affected. Regional resource assessments, which encompass several jurisdictions, will provide to the land managers within the region, data and resource evaluations to make

land use decisions expeditiously. This defensible rationale for the scientific foundation on which decisions are made will result in fewer lawsuits, appeals and delays.

Regional resource assessments would make information available to agency customers regardless of jurisdictional boundaries, providing them with one stop shopping. The increase in agency involvement will correspondingly increase traditional stakeholder involvement among different agencies.

Regional Resource Assessment Components

There are four key components that must be considered in conducting regional resource assessments:

1. Resource Conditions
 - a. Status of the resource(s)
 - 1) Spatial/temporal extent or distribution
 - 2) Availability of the resource
 - 3) Sensitivity (associated sensitive receptors or critical areas)
 - b. Constraints affecting resource development or use
 - 1) Legal or regulatory constraints
 - 2) Administrative or institutional constraints
 - 3) Physical, biological, or socio-economic constraints
 - c. Susceptibility to potential or known risks or effects
 - d. Carrying capacity, if definable
2. Trends
 - a. Historical use, changes in condition over time (quantity and quality)
 - b. RFD and RFA and how quickly they may occur
 - c. Exploration activity
3. Conflicts, problems, concerns or issues (things that help identify the need for an assessment)
 - a. Existing environmental effects (i.e., water quality, air quality, etc.)
 - b. Socio-economic implications or effects
 - c. Fish and wildlife
 - d. Threatened, endangered, and candidate species
 - e. National or regional precedence
4. Risk
 - a. Identify resources, land and resource uses, and geographic areas potentially at risk
 - 1) Specific areas and receptors
 - 2) Within the assessment area
 - b. Potential RFD or RFA that could add substantial risk

Conclusions: In addition to the compilation of the information gathered and developed in conducting a regional resource assessment, the conclusions of the assessment should be documented and an evaluation (report), incorporating each of the above four elements of a regional resource assessment, should be prepared to provide the support or bases for the conclusions.

Context, Purpose and Integrated Assessment Information

A critical step in conducting a regional resource assessment is to clearly define the context and purpose of the assessment so that all stakeholders can maintain the focus, and that it can be done in a timely and cost efficient manner. Typically, the purpose and context for a regional resource assessment will be driven by or based on an issue, problem, conflict or concern, which, by definition, involves two or more resource or land uses. Therefore, information from two or more specific resource assessments may need to be integrated to adequately evaluate an issue. For example, to do an evaluation concerning the impacts of oil and gas development on air quality, an assessment of oil and gas development (e.g., an oil and gas RFD scenario) and an assessment of air quality would need to be conducted and then integrated. Information from different regional resource assessments within the same general geographic area can be integrated into environmental analysis or the planning/decision-making process. Figure 1 provides an illustration of this.

Regional Resource Assessment Tools

Tools available for the completion of Regional Resource Assessments include:

1. **Geographic Information Systems (GIS):** Cooperating agencies contemplating conducting a regional resource assessment crossing multi-agency jurisdictional boundaries should discuss and resolve software and PC differences prior to initiation.
2. **Existing Information and Databases or Inventories:** Stakeholders should be consulted early in the design phase of a regional resource assessment to ensure the maximum use and consideration of existing data to minimize the data collection or generation of new data.
3. **Existing Assessments:** Existing assessments can serve as examples of both good and poor approaches to conducting a regional resource assessment. Applicable information from these can be incorporated into or used to support new assessments.
4. **Modeling:** Modeling may be required as part of a regional resource assessment to provide specific information on particular issues. There are several types of models available for use in the regional resource assessment process. The

use of any model must include documentation of the assumptions or data limitations so that future use of the modeling results will not be taken out of context or used outside the model limitations.

Glossary

The following definitions exist for the purpose of this report. Each agency may have specific definitions. *Also see those provided in RFD/CEA report.*

1. **Reasonably Foreseeable Development (RFD) Scenarios:** Anticipated oil and gas exploration and/or development activity (leasing, development, production, and abandonment) in a defined area for a specified period of time. The scenario is based primarily on geology (potential for oil and gas occurrence) and past and present oil and gas activity, with consideration of other significant factors such as economics, technology, physical limitations on access, existing or anticipated infrastructure, and transportation.
The BLMs Planning For Fluid Mineral Resources Handbook (H-1624-1, May 1990) identified RFD scenario as “projected or anticipated development, primarily associated with individual types of mineral development (e.g., oil and gas, coal, other leasable and locatable minerals) and that would contribute to a direct, indirect or cumulative effect on land and resource uses and the environment. “Development” is the key, and literal, operative here. These scenarios would be used as assumptions for analysis in the environmental analysis process.”
2. **Reasonably Foreseeable Actions (RFA) or Activities:** A Model or projection of any/all activities (industrial and mineral development, recreational activities and development, wildlife management, air and water resource management, urban development, transportation, etc.) within a defined geographic area and for a specified time frame that would contribute to a direct, indirect or cumulative effect on land and resource uses and the environment.
3. **Land Use Plan:** A set of land use or resource management objectives, allocation and action decisions, which establish management direction for resource and land use management within an administrative area. (e.g., USFS Forest Plans and BLM Resource Management Plans)

Team Members:

John Pyrdol, DOE, HQ
Erick Kaarlela, BLM, WO
Cindy Cody, EPA, Region 8
Kermit Witherbee, BLM, WO
Joe Patti, BLM, Wyoming State Office
George Diwachak, BLM, Utah State Office
Barry Burkhardt, USFS, Intermountain Region

